

The Semiotic Paradigm on Meaning in the Marketplace¹

Laura R. Oswald & David Glen Mick

The importance of understanding the nature and role of meaning in marketplace activities such as product design, branding, advertising, and retailing is indisputable among marketing strategists and researchers today. Consumer culture is, in a sense, the product of the consumer's relationship to messages of all kinds, from advertising and the organization of retail space to the cultural cues internalized through group participation and ethnic identification.

One of the richest and oldest paradigms for understanding meaning is *semiotics*. The term itself originates from ancient Greece in relation to study of signs, which were regarded in medical treatises as vital to the diagnoses of diseases. More generally, signs are regarded as anything that can stand for or communicate about something else (Eco 1976, 7). As such, they permeate much of life in various ways: language, behavior, dwellings, clothing, artifacts, and so forth. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, scholars such as Saint Augustine and John Locke elaborated on the character and functions of signs. But it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that semiotics was developed in detail by two intellectuals who were working independently on different sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They were the Swiss linguist F. de Saussure and American philosopher C. S. Peirce. Saussure (1983/1971/1913, 100-101) envisioned a general science of signs modeled after linguistic science, which he named, *la sémiologie*.

¹ Laura Oswald and David Mick co-authored this chapter from *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Russell W. Belk, editor, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd (21 Dec 2006).

Peirce (1955, 98) used the term *semiotics* to describe the relation between signs and thought or logic. Today the paradigm as a whole is mostly widely called semiotics, reflecting a shift away from linguistics as a dominating frame of reference for understanding signs and sign processes.

Roland Barthes introduced semiotics to the marketing discipline almost fifty years ago (Barthes 1967/1964). Semiotics and marketing spread throughout Europe in the 1970s and by the 1980s and 1990s spread worldwide. (Mick 1986, 1997; Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel, and Brannen 2004; Oswald 1996, 1999; Richins;1994; and Sherry 1987;). Semiotics is now thriving internationally as an assortment of perspectives, concepts, and tools for fostering new insights on communication and meaning in marketing and consumer behavior.

In this chapter we review advances in semiotic research within the traditions of Saussure and Peirce, highlight how researchers have applied semiotics to variety of strategic issues in marketing management, and provide a range of illustrations showing how. We conclude with a comparison of these two approaches and mention further resources for scholars looking to know more about semiotics and to how apply it in the service of marketing research.

The Saussurian tradition in marketing research

The Saussurian or European tradition in semiotics is grounded in the theory of structural linguistics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure (1983/1971/1913) based the semiotic paradigm on the dialectical relationship between a phonetic signifier, such as the sound/tree/, and a mental image that the signifier represents. [Figure 1] The

linguistic sign, for Saussure, is arbitrary, inasmuch as the decision to associate certain sounds with certain concepts is entirely based on convention.

Though Saussure and his followers in the realm of linguistics focused on the relationship of sounds to meanings in linguistic signs, the two-dimensional Saussurian sign has become a model for analyzing the structure of meaning in a number of media, including poetic imagery (Jakobson 1956), myth (Levi-Strauss 1967, 1983), cinema (Metz 1990/1974; Oswald 1986, 1994), and consumer behavior (Floch 1990). Such extrapolations are grounded in an understanding of non-linguistic signs, such as symbolism, rhetorical figures, and rituals, as “motivated” rather than arbitrary. In other words, the relationship between the signifier and signified for non-linguistic signs is driven by something intrinsic to the signified, rather than arbitrary or conventional, as in the relation between “garden” and “face” in the Shakespearean metaphor, “There is a garden in her face.”

Theoretical developments in the twentieth century moved Saussurian or structural semiotics beyond the analysis of form to the implication of the speaking and spectating “subject” in the construction of meaning. (Benveniste 1972; Jakobson 1956; Lacan 1971; Metz 1981). For conciseness and the purposes of the present discussion, we will focus on the contributions of Roman Jakobson, who linked semiotic operations to innate cognitive processes that enable subjects to interpret and organize their reality and communicate with others. In a study of aphasics, he determined that humans divide along the lines of a propensity to favor associations by similarity, including paradigms and metaphor, or a propensity to favor associations by contiguity, including syntagms (linear alignment) and metonymy (such as representing the whole by a part). Thus the dramatic style of William

Shakespeare can be distinguished by a metaphorical language that opens onto broad paradigmatic associations between multiple levels of human behavior and its meanings, such as good/evil, strong/weak, beautiful/plain, and life/death, while the dramatic style of Samuel Beckett builds upon metonymical operations referencing absence, lack, and logical implication between performance and off-stage reality (e.g., *Waiting for Godot*).

Illustrations of Saussurian semiotics in marketing research

Jakobson's research has important implications for brand strategy research. . The very notion of brand equity - the value attached to a brand name or logo that supercedes product attributes and differentiates brands in the competitive arena - is testimony to the power of symbolic representation to capture the hearts and minds of consumers by means of visual, audio, and verbal communication (see Aaker 1991, 1996; Bouchet 1991; Holt 2204; Keller 2002; Lannon 1993, Sherry 1998). Seen from this perspective, a brand can be defined as a system of signs and symbols that fulfill, in the imaginary/symbolic realm, consumer needs for intangibles such as an emotional experience, a relationship, or a sense of belonging in an increasingly fragmented and confusing world (Oswald 1996).

By accounting for relations between the form of meaning and mental operations in the speaker or spectator, Jakobson opened up the possibility of mapping semiotic relations between brand attributes and the satisfaction of unmet symbolic needs of consumers. For example, kids may buy Nike, not just shoes, and along with the acquisition of the brand goes participation in the Nike image and the Nike philosophy, "Just Do It!" Brands enhance or even define use-value in terms of image value – with

properties of significance that vary widely from status, playfulness, intelligence, masculinity, and femininity, to refinement, frugality, defiance, and sexiness.

Example: BMW. The symbolic function of brands is noteworthy in the automotive category, where drivers associate status, prestige, and personality with the type of car they drive. For example, in a consumer study of luxury automotive brands (Oswald, DDB Needham, Chicago, 1991), respondents were put through a long interview involving projective tasks where they identified symbolic associations and personifications for luxury cars, including Mercedes, Volvo, BMW, Lexus, Audi, and Cadillac. A 65-year-old male respondent reported that he had replaced his BMW with a Lexus several years before, when back pain made the sportier car too difficult to handle. However, when he retired from the business world, he bought a BMW 6-Series in order to soften the transition from work to retirement and the recognition of his advancing age. The following grid maps the contrasts between the BMW and the Lexus brands in terms of paradigmatic differences stemming from the meanings and lifestyle experiences that consumers associated with the two brands in 1991. [See Table 1]

Two Brands, Two Lifestyles		
	BMW	Lexus
Style	Sports Car	Sedan
Age	Young	Old
Personality	Radical	Conservative
Behavior	Risk-taking	Stodgy

Table 1

This example highlights both the force and limitations symbolic consumption. After six months of back pain due to the sporty seats of the BMW, the man resigned himself to the more comfortable but stodgier car, and switched back to the Lexus.

Advertising Rhetoric and Symbolic Consumption. By articulating meaning in terms of broad rhetorical operations, Jakobson provided means of accounting for the ability non-linguistic discourse, such as imagery, to communicate without strict laws of grammar in the manner of language. Such developments beyond linguistics enabled scholars (see, for instance, Metz 1990/1974 and Wollen 1973) to develop a structural model for producing and interpreting meaning in cinema. Visual communication operates along the lines of associations by similarity and contiguity. Associations of similarity operate on a rhetorical level in metaphorical figures, and on a discursive level in paradigms such as those mentioned above. Associations of contiguity operate on a rhetorical level in metonymical figures linking the part to the whole for example, and on a discursive level in the alignment of elements in a sequence or syntagm.

The ability to create and read associations by similarity and contiguity enables marketers to communicate brand messages via photography. In the following advertisement for Nike Shox Turbo running shoes, an elaborate network of metaphorical and metonymical associations both creates associations of power and dexterity with the brand, and implicates the reader/consumer in those associations. [See Figure 2] By representing the Nike running shoe as a turbine driving an engine, the ad creates a chain of paradigmatic associations beginning with the metaphorical substitution of the turbine by the shoe. This substitution is then implicated in a metonymy of part for the whole,

inasmuch as the turbine is a component of the engine. The turbine/shoe metaphor is implicated in another chain of metonymies associating the shoe with the foot, leg and body of the runner/consumer. Thus, by virtue of the metonymies linking the turbine and the shoe to the engine and runner respectively, the metaphor shoe=turbine takes on a persuasive force that would be absent from the metaphor standing alone, giving rise to the interpretation that when the runner wears this shoe, they acquire the power of a turbine-driven engine. This chain of figures is condensed in the brand name for the shoe, the Nike Turbo Shox, designed to enhance the runner’s performance.

To reinforce the associations between the turbine and the shoe, the image is inscribed with an extended verbal metaphor in fine print: “This is a super-tuned blast of go-fast under the hood, a big breath of nitrous when you need it, with pure Nike Shox responsive cushioning technology to harness every last bit of horsepower. So be ready when you put your foot to the floor. The Nike Shox Turbo and other tools for better running at NIKERUNNING.COM.” Analysis of this semiotic system is summarized in the following grid. [Table 2]

	Similarity	Contiguity
	Metaphor	Metonymy
Rhetoric	The Nike shoe is like a turbine. (metaphor)	The shoe linked logically and spatially to the foot that would wear it, which is linked to the runner/consumer. (metonymy)
	Paradigm	Syntagm
Discourse	The turbine is associated with engine power, force and drive in the automotive discourse. The Nike shoe is associated with runner power, force and drive in the brand discourse.	A turbine drives the engine. A Nike shoe drives the runner.

Table 2

By linking the structure of signs to mental operations in the speaker or spectator, the work of Jakobson and other semioticians such as Benveniste (1972/1966) and Eco (1976) led to the intersection of semiotics, philosophy and the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century (Bourdieu 1977; Lacan 1971; Levi-Strauss 1967), Metz 1981; Oswald 1999), enabling marketing researchers to segment markets along the lines of the values, lifestyles, and cultural imperatives, to position brands in terms of the symbolic associations they elicit in the marketplace, and to link brand meanings to advertising imagery.

Socio-Semiotics: Mapping Consumer Mythology. Though semiotics can be used to diagnose problems in visual communication, it can also be used strategically in consumer research to develop positioning, segmentation (Rose 2001, 69-99), and advertising communication. European semioticians such as Floch (2000) use the semiotic square developed by Greimas (1983/1966) to map the brand world both as it is communicated in advertising on the one hand, and as it is perceived by consumers on the other. The semiotic square extends the binary models of Saussure and his followers, such as Claude Levi-Strauss (1983) in the realm of anthropology, by providing means of mapping semiotic dimensions in four rather than two dimensions. Beginning with the binary opposition of two values, such as male/female or “for self”/“for others,” the researcher can explore the gray areas between these extremes by introducing an operation of negation: “not male/not female”, “not for self” and “not for others”. By superimposing a plurality of binary oppositions including gender, relationships, and

emotional orientation, the semiotic square provides a more nuanced and refined grid for mapping consumer segments and brand meanings than the simple paradigmatic opposition of two dimensions.

Example: Cosmetics for Men. To illustrate how the semiotic square could be used to target consumer segments and position brands, the following case study examines the way cultural codes and myths influence both *perception* of masculinity and the *attitudes* of male consumers towards the men's cosmetics category. The market in cosmetics for men has grown by as much as 50% in some sectors (Dano, Roux and Nyeck 2003, 1-3). In their related study, Dano, Roux, and Nyeck (2003) set out to articulate the semiotic dimensions of the men's cosmetics category, including an understanding of the ways cosmetics fulfilled unmet needs and wants among men, how the men's market could be segmented along the lines of personality, lifestyle, and product usage, and how well brand messages met the needs of these segments. The researchers used a two-pronged approach including analysis of consumer data on the "demand" side, and analysis of brand communication on the "supply" side. By means of qualitative interviews with gay and straight men in France and Canada, they identified a spectrum of masculine identities, from the super male to effeminate. Second, they performed a semiotic analysis of codes communicating masculine identities in the advertising for fourteen brands, including Biotherm, Body Shop, Clarins, Clinique, Décléor, Lierac, J-P Gaultier, Aramis, Lancôme, Nickel, Nivéa, Tim Robinn, Vichy, and Zirh. The researchers then mapped findings from the two studies on a conceptual grid. [Figure 3]

The qualitative study gauged relations between respondents' interpretations of masculinity—based on stereotypes ranging from the macho male to the effeminate male -

and their perceptions and uses of cosmetics and cosmetic brands. Respondents were asked to respond to questions ranging from the choice and purchase of personal care products, to the importance of beauty and physical appearance in their own lives, and to express their feelings about the word “cosmetics” generated by projective tasks such as free association.

The authors found that the use and perception of cosmetics among men divides along the lines of a central paradigmatic opposition, the masculine and feminine, each of which can be further articulated by means of lifestyle and psychological dimensions, including the degree to which self care was subordinated to caring about or impressing others, men’s emotional investment in cosmetics, and their need or ability to deviate from the norm or stand out from the crowd. These dimensions translate into specific needs and wants relative to personal care products ranging from dermatological products to skin cream to make-up.

A multipart graphic model based on Greimas’ semiotic square was then developed from analysis of two dominant codes that emerged from the interviews, one for gender, expressed in the binary opposition male/female, and the other relating to product use, expressed in the binary opposition for self/for others. Whether one used cosmetics for personal hygiene and comfort or to influence the perceptions and behavior of others, was paradigmatically related to these primary oppositions, and these included reason/emotion, hygienic/cosmetic usage, and self-care/seduction. The researchers found that the acceptance and use of cosmetics increases in proportion to the respondent’s identification with more androgynous or feminine stereotypes that emphasize emotions, relationships, and beauty. [Figure 3] Above and beyond the important function of

mapping the personal and cultural dimensions of the men's cosmetics category, the socio-semiotic approach by Dano et al. (2003) performs a key strategic function by tracing correlations between consumer types and brand symbolism, demonstrating trends in the competitive set, and identifying consumer segments that have not been targeted at all. The semiotic square provided a virtual roadmap of the men's cosmetics category, enabling researchers to later map the various brands in terms of the kinds of men they targeted.

The analysis graph in Figure 3 shows that most brands are concentrated in the upper left quadrant, targeting an unambiguous male type with personal care products for self. They systematically elude association with either androgynous or feminine characteristics in the other quadrants. Alternatively, the brands that move away from the stereotypical male tend to target homosexual men who identify with feminine stereotypes for beauty and seduction (e.g., Gauthier, Zirh). Note that there are few or no brands in the lower left and upper right quadrants where the positions for masculinity are ambiguous. Those two quadrants point to an emerging male type represented in fashion magazines as the "metrosexual," a heterosexual man whose consumer behavior betrays elements of seduction, performance for others, and personal embellishment traditionally associated with the feminine.

By introducing the element of negation to the traditional binary grid, the semiotic square enables the researcher to represent ambiguous realms of meaning in consumer behavior, such as the movement of male identity between the positions of masculine and feminine, between relatedness to self and to others, between reason and passion. In other words, male consumers of cosmetics need not be totally oriented to a masculine identity

or a female identity, but may find themselves somewhere in between the two. They may be neither entirely focused on the role of cosmetics for personal satisfaction, nor on the effects of cosmetic use on their appearance for others, but both, depending on the occasion. By positioning brands in the “white spaces” between cultural stereotypes, marketers gain access to emerging realms of meaning that ultimately drive brand creativity, originality, and innovation.

The Peircean tradition in marketing research

Peirce’s semiotics (1931-1958, 1955) is based in philosophy and the physical sciences. His model of signification involves three parts: the representamen (the sign), the object (physical or mental, which the representamen refers to), and the interpretant (which corresponds to a response, reaction, or interpretation). Peirce developed an extensive taxonomy of different aspects of his three-part model, including the identification of numerous kinds of sign-object relations, the name for which many scholars use the label semantics. He also delineated different types of interpretants, with one set of categories being the immediate, the dynamical, and the final, and another set of categories being the emotional, the energetic, and the logical. He also discussed different mental operations in processing signs, focusing on what he called firstness, secondness, and thirdness, in addition to the logical operations of induction, deduction, and abduction.

Of the various sign-object or semantic relations that Peirce identified, there are three that he considered most important and that have since been widely applied in the humanities and social science. The first type is icons, which are sign-object relations based on similarity (e.g., a drawing of a well known person). Indexes are a second type

that involve sign-object relations based on a causal connection (e.g., smoke and fire). Third are symbols, with sign-object relations based on convention or cultural rules (e.g., words and their core concepts; certain clothing and its meanings). These fundamental distinctions have been used across an array of marketing topics, and sometime crossed or combined in novel ways. In the subsections that follow, we focus on research within the Peircean paradigm that has emphasized the icon-index-symbol categories of semantic relations.

Illustrations of Peircean semiotics in marketing research

Product and logo design. Kawama (1987, 1990) has used Peirce's three main types of sign-object relations to identify and discuss how different product designs can potentiate intended key meanings. For example, he discusses a pure icon in the design of a camera where the camera is shaped like Mickey Mouse's face in order to suggest frivolity and its suitability for a particular target market (children). In more complex examples he discusses how iconic relations are merged with indexical relations, as when aircraft designs use adaptations of bird wings and when computer keyboards are formed according to hand and finger shapes.

The Finnish scholar Vihma (1992, 1995) shows further how on Peirce's three-types of sign-object relations can assist in conceptualizing meaning and function in product design. Indexicality can include lights (e.g., yellow, red) and sounds (e.g., buzzes, beeps) that suggest when certain product operations are changing or completed. Symbolism can include logos and other graphics that differentiate one brand or model from another. Iconicity can include color (e.g., white suggests lightweight), materials

(e.g., glassy suggests fragility), and shape (e.g., sleek and forward-leaning can suggest quickness). Given the importance of iconicity and meaning in product design, Vihma (1992) has further delineated six kinds of iconicity. For example, one form of iconicity is based on tradition (e.g., most paperclips look alike) and another form of iconicity is when products look as though they belong together in particular settings (e.g., kitchen appliances, office furniture). Together, Kawama (1987, 1990) and (Vihma (1992, 1995) show convincingly that most product designs—even for mundane products like chop sticks and clothes irons—are a complex web of icons, indexes, and symbols that serve to communicate a variety of meanings and goal-relevant procedures.

Looking more specifically at brand logos, Heilbrunn (1997, 1998) identified three variations founded on Peirce's sign-object relations. One is the alphanumeric type (e.g., IBM, 3M), a second is the iconic type (e.g., Shell Oil's yellow seashell), and a third is a mixture of the prior two. Shell's logo, he argues, is an iconic and indexical sign-object relationship in regard to its corporate identity, including its genesis in maritime areas and activities, its name (with the similarity between seashells and the company's moniker), and its main business of mining oil that derives from fossilization. In a complementary analysis of logos based in Peirce's paradigm, Morgado (1993) showed how clothing trademarks that involve animals (e.g., Izod alligator) have not only obvious iconicities to real-world animals, but they also harbor indexical qualities (e.g., some emblems imply socioeconomic status due to higher costs of the clothes) and symbolic qualities (e.g., standing for a particular designer and other mythic associations about the specific animal).

Advertising. Peirce's sign-object distinctions have also been useful in theorizing and researching advertising. Zakia (1986) selected an evocative imagistic ad for Schnapple liquor that shows an attractive woman wearing a shiny evening dress and who is delicately holding a glass of liquor. The ad is saturated with meanings facilitated by several iconic, indexical, and symbolic qualities. Moreover, to show that these Peircean distinctions can be linked insightfully to consumer responses—something that no one else had done up to that time—Zakia showed the ad to a small sample of consumers and had them supply immediate verbal reactions that expressed the overall meaning from their personal perspectives. He then codified the reactions into four themes, which he labeled sensual, sophisticated, exotic, and femme fatale. Zakia next applied the notions of icon, index, and symbol to the various ad elements to suggest which signs were evoking which themes in the minds of the respondents. His interpretive analysis suggested, for instance, that the sensuality theme was supported by iconic relations in which the woman's large pouting lips served as a genital echo. The sensuality theme was also reinforced by indexical relations (e.g. one of the woman's fingers pointed to a highlighted area of her breast) and symbolic relations (e.g., her tight dress and its snake-skin quality implied temptation and magnetism).

More recently, McQuarrie and Mick (1999) applied the same Peircean distinctions to establish their interpretative analyses for a set of visually-oriented ads, which then served as the groundwork for manipulating key ad signs to examine the effects of rhetorical figures (e.g., rhyme, metaphor) on consumer attitudes, cognitions, and memory. For instance, one of their ads was for a motion sickness remedy in which the product package appeared as the seat buckle on a car seat (with straps coming into

each end, as with a true seat buckle). McQuarrie and Mick identified this type of rhetorical strategy as a visual metaphor in which different planes of reality (a cardboard product box and a metal buckle) are cross-stitched in an artfully crafted visual display. Further, they interpreted the ad and its meanings in terms of key (a) iconic relations (e.g., between the rectangular package shape and rectangular shape of a typical seat belt buckle), (b) indexical relations (e.g., between riding in a car and developing motion sickness), and (c) symbolic relations (between seat belts and what their use communicates about the user). To create a comparable control version of this ad (as they did for each target ad), the authors diminished the rhetoric and its meanings by substituting a real seat buckle for the product package, and moved the package to a position further back on the seat. This transition effectively deflated the metaphorical characteristics of the original ad without totally removing the package from its context or erasing the key brand meanings apparently intended by the advertiser. The experimental results revealed that subjects who saw the original visual metaphor for the motion sickness remedy invoked more meanings (had more elaborative thoughts) than those who saw the diminished rhetorical version. This same result held for three other rhetorical ads that were similarly manipulated. In a follow-up study, subjects who saw the original visual metaphor liked that ad more than subjects who saw the diminished version; this effect was particularly pronounced among American versus foreign students, apparently because the Americans were more acculturated to and more savvy about processing and appreciating such visually clever ads. In both Zakia's (1986) and McQuarrie and Mick's (1999) work, Peirce's distinctions among icons, indexes, and symbols helped to highlight

the potentialized meanings in select ads, and formed the foundations for understanding actual consumer responses.

Being there as a consumer. Peirce's paradigm has also been fruitfully applied to understanding experiences at various consumption sites. For instance, Umiker-Sebeok (1992) studied in depth 41 visitors to a Midwest museum, using a combination of observations, interviews, and a survey. Based on Peirce, her analyses of the data suggested that the visitors first perceive the exhibits in terms of similar things seen before (iconic relations) and this initial stage of perception invites further involvement and interpretations. Then visitors note what is new or different in these particular exhibits, and they go about examining pertinent indexical relations, including how the exhibit qualities link to the world beyond the museum. In the third and final phase, visitors translate the exhibits as symbols, that is, drawing on the habits and proclivities of interpretation that are a function of the visitors' sociocultural background. Umiker-Sebeok concludes from her analysis that museum visitors are active participants in constructing meaning for exhibits according to their own needs and conditions. By implication, this insight likely holds for many other consumer settings as well, including malls, retail shops, and Internet sites.

Everyday products and ownership. In a study focusing on understanding the nature of product ownership, Grayson and Schulman (2000) argued that the Saussurean paradigm is insufficient for explaining meaning and memory related to consumer possessions. To explore this proposition, they focused on special possessions as a case in

point. The authors contend that memories are tangibly present in the many things that instigate those recollections, and this tangibility is clearly manifest in possessions that consumers consider irreplaceable (e.g., a wedding band from a now-deceased spouse). The authors argue that if possessions had only arbitrary symbolic meanings (which is the emphasis of the Saussurean paradigm), then any possession lost should be able to be replaced with an identical copy, without any loss of meaning or value. However, participants in Grayson and Shulman's (2000) research reported that precise substitutes for lost special possessions were not acceptable to them. The authors interpreted this finding to mean that irreplaceable possessions are causally linked to given people, places, and activities, and thereby these possessions are more than symbolic in meaning. They are also indexical within the Peircean paradigm, insofar as they have a spatial-temporal quality of co-presence (meaning and memory) that cannot be replicated.

Discussion

As a research tool, semiotics provides means of examining how meanings in the marketplace are constructed at the intersection of marketing strategy and consumer behavior. In the narrow space of our chapter, we have sought to show how two major traditions of semiotics—Saussurian and Peircean—have led to descriptive and explanatory insights on marketplace meaning. Discussion of the European tradition in semiotics, beginning with Saussure, emphasized the formal similarity between the structure of language and the structure of non-linguistic sign systems such as consumer behavior and advertising imagery, and the potential to move beyond the description of meanings to the theoretical implication of the reader/spectator/consumer in the

production of meaning. The European tradition in semiotics emphasizes the interface between semiotics and the social sciences of psychology, sociology, and anthropology, enabling the researcher to draw inferences between the form of the message—be it advertising, consumer data, or package design—and personal, cultural, and social frames that shape the consumer’s interpretation of meaning.

Our discussion of the Peircean tradition and its uses in marketing research revealed how just a few concepts from semiotics, such as index, icon, and symbol, can be applied to an array of topics. Product designs and brand logos are replete with meanings from those tri-type semantic relations, triggered by the signs of varied textures, images, colors, lights, shapes, materials, and so forth. Advertising can also be decomposed into indexes, icons, and symbols, and the subtle manipulation of their characteristics exposes the rhetorical influence that these distinctions carry in the meanings set up and evoked. Attitudes and memories from processing the ads have been shown to be similarly affected. The concepts of index, icon, and symbol also help to unpack experiences in consumption environments as a sequence of semantic events and to elucidate the meaningful spirit of product ownership and the valuation of special possessions. If one assumes, as Peirce did, that the universe is profused with signs, then by logical necessity all products, possessions, and consumption are inexorably meaningful at their core. Adopting the viewpoint, concepts, and analytical tools of semiotics extracts this core and helps to unpeel its layers of qualities and processes.

For purposes of marketing research, the semiotics of Saussure and Peirce offer equally valid but distinct tools for examining the structure and interpretation of meaning

in the market place. However, it should be noted that these two approaches to semiotics stem from two distinct philosophical traditions i.e. phenomenology and pragmatism, and imply two distinct ways of thinking about signs, meaning, and reality. Peirce (e.g., 1955) sought to understand how a rational interpretation of the world is grounded in signs. His emphasis in semiotics is often related to logic, hence the name of his contribution to semiotics. He sought to classify signs in terms of their distinct formal properties, and to unpack the complex interrelationships among different types of sign in any instance of communication. Peirce's semiotics implies an interpretation of the world or "reality" as a function of perception, inasmuch as perception is shaped by semiotic relationships, especially the indexical, the iconic, and the symbolic.

Saussure, on the other hand, sought to identify a universal structure common to all kinds of signs. In line with a phenomenological interpretation of reality, the Saussurian sign consists of a dialectical relationship between a material *signifier*, such as a series of sounds, and a *signified*, an abstract concept in the mind of the speaker. In Saussure, signs do not operate in isolation, but create meanings in context with other signs in a semiotic system or discourse. It is only at the level of discourse that signs contribute to the formation of rhetorical figures or icons, indexes, and symbols. Inasmuch as discourse is constructed by a conscious act, the Saussurian tradition is grounded in the phenomenological assumption of the origin and condition of possibility of meaning in the conscious Self. Thus, the Saussurian tradition invited theoretical developments in European semiotics in the 20th century that focused on the implication of self, society, and culture in sign production or *semiosis*.

The goal of this chapter was to discuss the importance of meanings in marketing research and how semiotics can be used to understand consumers, advertising, possessions, and brands. Furthermore, managing brand equity is tantamount to managing brand semiotics, since the semiotic dimension of brands is instrumental for building awareness, positive associations, and long-term customer loyalty (Aaker, 1991) Semiotics provides the researcher analytical and theoretical tools for explaining how brands mean - from the logo and packaging to the brand mythology generated by mass communications (Sherry 1988). Furthermore, semiotics includes a strategic function inasmuch as it provides means of clarifying the competitive differences between brands, identifying unmet emotional needs of their target segments, and developing advertising that communicates the values and associations the brand represents.

Semiotics is broad in scope, variegated among its founders and subsequent contributors, and often technical in its vocabulary and applications. As a result, debates about the nature, labels, and uses of semiotics are ongoing (Mick 1997; Oswald 1996, 1999). Nonetheless, many researchers continue to believe that semiotics is a discerning paradigm for effectively addressing the complex character and function of communication and meaning. More particularly, Mick et al.'s (2004) lengthy review demonstrates that there has been an unmistakable escalation and maturation of semiotic-oriented research and its value in marketing research.

The rewards of semiotic research outweigh the challenges encountered in learning and applying semiotic methods. The authors recommend several courses of action for the uninitiated. They include consulting distinguished compendiums (Barthes 1967/1964, Boussiac 1998; Nöth 1990), attending seminars by knowledgeable scholars and

practitioners, become acquainted with, and then to emulate, some of the leading examples of semiotic marketing research, available in sources including but not limited to the following: Floch (2001/1991), Holbrook and Hirschman (1993), Pinson (1988), Solomon (1988), Umiker-Sebeok (1987), and a variety of other examples discussed in Hetzel and Marion (1995a, 1995b) and Mick et al. (2004).

Endnotes

- 1 The authors' names are listed alphabetically; each contributed equally to this chapter.

References

- Aaker, David A. (1991), *Managing Brand Equity*, New York: The Free Press.
- Barthes, Roland (1967/1964), *Elements of Semiology*, translated by A. Lavers and C. Smith, New York: Hill and Lang.
- Benveniste, Emile (1971/1966), *Problems in General Linguistics*, translated from French by Mary Elizabeth Meek Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press.
- Bouchet, Dominique (1991), "Marketing as a specific form for communication," in H. H. Larsen, D. G. Mick, and C. Alsted (eds.), *Marketing and Semiotics*, Copenhagen: Handelshøjskolens Forlag, pp. 31-51.
- Bouissac, Paul (ed.) (1998), *Encyclopedia of Semiotics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dano, Florence, Elyette Roux, and Simon Nyeck (2003), "Les hommes, leur apparence et les cosmétiques: Approach socio-sémiotique," *DM Decisions Marketing* 29 (January-March), 7-18.
- Eco, Umberto (1976), *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Floch, Jean-Marie (2001/1990), *Semiotics, Marketing, and Communication: Beneath the Signs, the Strategies*, translated by R. O. Bodkin, Houndmills, UK: Palgrave.
- Grayson, Kent and David Shulman (2000), "Indexicality and the verification function of irreplaceable possessions: A semiotic analysis," *Journal of Consumer Research* 27 (June), 17-30.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien (1983/1966), *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, translated by D. McDowell, R. Schleicher, and A. Velie, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Heilbrunn, Benôit (1997), "Representation and legitimacy: A semiotic approach to the logo,"

- in W. Nöth (ed.), *Semiotics of the Media: State of the Art, Projects, and Perspectives*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 175-189
- _____ (1998), "My brand the hero? A semiotic analysis of the consumer-brand relationship," in M. Lambkin (ed.), *European Perspectives on Consumer Behavior*, Hemel Hempstead, UK: Prentice-Hall, pp. 1-43.
- Hetzel, Patrick and Marion, Gilles (1995a), "Contributions of French semiotics to marketing research knowledge (Part I)," *Marketing and Research Today* 23 (February), 25-34.
- _____ (1995b), "Contributions of French semiotics to marketing research knowledge (Part II)," *Marketing and Research Today* 23 (May), 75-84.
- Holbrook, Morris B. and Hirschman, Elizabeth C. (1993), *The Semiotics of Consumption: Interpreting Symbolic Consumer Behavior in Popular Culture and Works of Art*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Holt, Douglas, B. (2004), *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Jakobson, Roman (1990), *On Language*, L. Waugh and M. Monville-Bruston (eds.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kawama, Tetsuo (1987), "A semiotic approach to the design process," in J. Umiker-Sebeok (ed.), *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 57-70.
- _____ (1990), "A semiotic approach to product forms," in T. A. Sebeok and J. Umiker-Sebeok (eds.), *The Semiotic Web 1989*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 625-638.
- Keller, Kevin Lane (2002), *Strategic Brand Management*, New York: Prentice Hall.

- Lacan, Jacques (1971), "Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient Freudien," *in Ecrits II*, Paris: Seuil, pp. 151-191.
- Lannon, Julie (1993), "Asking the Right Questions: What Do People Do with Advertising?" in *Brand Equity and Advertising*, David A. Aaker and Alexander L. Biel, eds. pp 163-176.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude (1967), "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Structural Anthropology*, New York, Doubleday-Ancor Books, Chapter XI, pp. 202-228.
- _____ (1983) *The Raw and the Cooked*, John and Doreen Weightman, translators. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- McQuarrie, Edward F. and David Glen Mick (1999), "Visual rhetoric in advertising: Text-interpretive, experimental, and reader-response analyses," *Journal of Consumer Research* 26 (June), 37-54.
- Metz, Christian (1990/1974), *Language and Cinema: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, translated by Michael Taylor, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____ (1981), *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, translated by Celia Briton, Anwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Mick, David Glen (1986), "Consumer research and semiotics: Exploring the morphology of signs, symbols, and significance," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13 (2), 196-213.
- Mick, David Glen (1997), "Semiotics in marketing and consumer research: Balderdash, verity, pleas," in S. Brown and D. Turley (eds.), *Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge*, London: Routledge, pp. 249-262.

- Mick, David Glen, James E. Burroughs, Patrick Hetzel, and Mary Yoko Brannen (2004),
 "Pursuing the meaning of meaning in the commercial world: An international
 review of marketing and consumer research founded on semiotics," *Semiotica*,
 152 (1/4), 1-74.
- Morgado, Marcia A. (1993), "Animal trademark emblems on fashion apparel: A semiotic
 interpretation," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 11 (3), 31-38.
- Nöth, Winfried (1990), *Handbook of Semiotics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Oswald, Laura (1984) "The Subject in Question: New Directions in Semiotics and
 Cinema," *Semiotica*, Vol.48 (3/4).
- _____ (1986), "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction: In Quest of Cinema,"
Semiotica, Vol.60 (3/4).
- _____ (1989) *Jean Genet and the Semiotics of Performance*, Bloomington, IN:
 Indiana University Press.
- _____ (1994) "Cinema-Graphia: Eisenstein, Derrida, and the Sign of Cinema,"
 in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, Brunette, Peter and David Wills, eds., New
 York, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp.248-263.
- _____ (1996) "The Place and Space of Consumption in a Material World," *Design
 Issues*, Spring, pp. 48-62.
- _____ (1999) "Culture Swapping: the Ethnogenesis of Middle Class Haitian-
 American Immigrants," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 25, March, pp. 303-
 318.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders (1931-1958). *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*.
 Volumes 1-6 Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.) and Volumes 7-8 Arthur Burks

- (ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders (1955), "Logic as Semiotic," in Justus Buchler (ed.), *The Philosophical Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, New York: Dover Press, pp. 98-119.
- Pinson, Christian (ed.) (1988), *The International Journal of Research on Marketing*, Special Issue on Semiotics and Marketing Communication Research, 4 (3 & 4).
- Richins, Marsha (1994), "Valuing Things: The Public and Private Meanings of Possessions," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 21, No. 3, December, pp. 504-521.
- Rose, Dan (1995), "Active Ingredients," in J. F. Sherry, Jr. (ed.), *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 51-85.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de (1983/1971/1913), *Course in General Linguistics*, a translation of *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris: Payot. Translated by Roy Harris, London: G. Duckworth Publishers.
- Sherry, John (1988), "'May Your Life Be Marvelous': English Language Labeling and the Semiotics of Japanese Promotion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, 14-188.
- _____ (1998), "The Company Store: Nike Town Chicago and the Emplaced Brandscape," in *Service Scapes: The Concept of Place in Contemporary Markets*, John F. Sherry, ed., Chicago: NTC Business Books.
- Solomon, Jack (1988), *The Signs of Our Time*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Umiker-Sebeok, Jean (ed.) (1987), *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- _____ (1992), "Meaning construction in a cultural gallery: A sociosemiotic study of consumption experiences in a museum," in J. F. Sherry Jr. and B. Sternthal (eds.),

Advances in Consumer Research, vol. 19, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, pp. 46-55.

Vihma, Susann (1992), "Iconicity and other signs in the form of design products," in S. Vihma (ed.), *Objects and Images*, Helsinki: University of Industrial Arts, pp. 100-105.

_____ (1995), *Products as Representation: A Semiotic and Aesthetic Study of Design Products*, Helsinki: University of Art and Design.

Wollen, Peter (1973), *Signs and Meaning in Cinema*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Zakia, Richard D. (1986), "Adverteasement," *Semiotica*, 59 (1/2), 1-11.